DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 447 131 SP 039 614

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TITLE Perceived Responsibility of Prospective Teachers for the Moral Development of Their Students.
PUB DATE 2000-11-16
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Bowling Green, KY, November 15-17, 2000).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Role; Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; *Moral Development; *Moral Values; Parent Role; Preservice Teacher Education; School Role; *Student Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Responsibility; *Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS Moral Education

ABSTRACT

This study investigated who preservice teachers considered responsible for the moral development of their students. The study involved a qualitative examination of the journal responses of 30 preservice teachers to two questions: the extent to which schools are moral environments and the extent to which it is the teacher's responsibility to foster moral development in his or her students. Student teachers' journals addressed the role of the school or community, the teacher, and the parents. Respondents believed that schools are moral environments, essentially due to the inherent morality of the teaching process. They saw teachers as moral leaders and moralizing agents who should take some responsibility for developing students' belief systems. Student teachers felt that teachers must assume responsibility, though they were divided into four groups as to how and why. Not all respondents believed that schools and teachers should assume the role of moral development. Many indicated that the home environment or the parent was very responsible for moral development of the child. Secondary education majors tended to feel that schools had failed in the goal of being moral. (Contains 26 references.) (SM)

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ED 447 131

Perceived Responsibility of Prospective Teachers for the Moral Development of Their Students

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SP039614

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Abstract

Preservice teachers' perceived responsibility for the moral development of their students was examined. Journal responses (n = 30) were qualitatively examined for themes in moral development. Results suggest that the preservice teachers both hold that schools are moral environments and assume some personal responsibility for the moral development for their students. However, the roles of teachers and parents are fundamentally disjointed, representing a lack of integration regarding holistic planning for educative problems. Teacher education programs are encouraged to facilitate such planning in the moral domain and otherwise.

Perceived Responsibility of Prospective Teachers for the Moral Development of Their Students

The role of moral and character education has been hotly debated. Nevertheless, as Hamberger and Moore (1997) noted: "Americans are generally less than satisfied with the atmosphere of daily life. They bemoan lack of civility, failure to respect others, refusal to accept responsibility, and threats to personal safety" (p. 301). Increasingly, many are looking to schools to "shoulder the burden of developing a better society" (Hamberger & Moore, 1997, p. 301). In response to this "burden," many schools and institutions of teacher education have begun to examine the ethical justification and practical implications of moral and character education initiatives (cf. Bergem, 1993a; Hamberger & Moore, 1997; Lampe, 1994; Ryan, 1988; Wicks, 1982; Yost, 1997).

The broad themes of the debate center on the moral nature of schooling, and whether schools are inherently moral environments. Goodlad (1990a, 1994), for example, argued that the process of teaching, by its very nature, invokes values. Therefore, teaching should be guided by normative principles as schools assume responsibility for their students. Furthermore, Yost (1997) noted, "Teacher educators must prepare novice teachers to competently handle the moral judgments and decisions

inherent in teaching" (p. 281). There appears some consensus in the field that schools do indeed function within the moral domain. The rub, however, is how public schools are supposed to function in this domain within an increasingly pluralistic, multicultural society. Nevertheless, as Dewey (1959) noted, the learning process is "pregnant with moral possibility" (p. 59).

Much of the research in this arena has focused on the moral reflectivity and professional lives of teachers and their subsequent ability to both recognize and embrace their own values as well as those of others (cf. Oser, 1989, 1992). As noted by Bergem (1993a):

> Because they are thought of moral agents, teachers are encouraged to express their own moral view (Ryan, 1986) in order to maintain the confidence that both students and parents have developed toward our school systems (Sockett, 1990). Hence, studies of the moral socialization of prospective teachers have evolved within the area of teacher education research (Su, 1989; Goodlad, 1990[b]; Bergem, 1993[b]) [sic]. (p. 297)

Ryan (1986) explained that teacher education in the United States underwent a period in the early 1980's of supposed value neutrality, and observed that "Values clarification, which urges teachers not to impose their values (and thus often making them appear to be value-neutral), became a staple of [teacher

education] methods courses" (p. 19). More recently, however, many educators have recognized the inherent moral implications of teaching and examined ways to impact the moral reflectivity of preservice teachers.

In efforts to understand the professional morality of preservice teachers, Lampe (1994) observed that both entry level teacher education students' and exit level student teachers' moral reasoning, as evaluated on the Defining Issues Test, were below average when compared to general college students. However, both Lampe (1994) and Bergem (1993a) noted growth in moral reasoning during the formal teacher education curriculum. Bergem (1993a) further found evidence that the moral sensibilities of preservice teachers could, in fact, be fostered during teacher education, despite arguments of some to the contrary. Furthermore, Yost (1997) found that a teacher education program with an explicitly defined mission based on the moral dimensions of teaching can indeed facilitate the moral perspectives of professional teachers.

In these and related studies, the impact of the teacher education program has largely focused on either the level of teachers' reflectivity and moral reasoning (see e.g., Bergem, 1993; Lampe, 1994) or on their perspective of what experiences in the teacher education program were useful in fostering critical reflectivity (see e.g., Yost, 1997). This research is

in contrast to earlier research indicating that changing the moral beliefs of prospective teachers can be difficult practice. However, while current research is promising in this regard, important (and largely ignored) in the discussion are studies that explicitly examine the degree that prospective teachers feel responsible for the moral development of their students. Little research has examined the expected relationship between teacher and student, and, instead, most efforts have focused on the professional morality of the teachers themselves. As Rest (1984) observed, however, moral beliefs do not necessarily translate into moral action. Without perceived responsibility, competent action is unlikely.

To address this apparent void in the literature, the purpose of the present study was to examine the perceived responsibility of prospective teachers for the moral development of their students. It has long been assumed, and researched, that the ways in which preservice teachers assume responsibility for students impacts student learning and social development (cf. Woolfolk, 1998). Teacher expectations can be powerful predictors of behavior. The present study provides some preliminary information regarding the ways preservice teachers may assume responsibility for the moral domain by examining reflective journal responses.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

The initial pool of participants included 186 preservice teachers attending a required educational psychology course in a large public university in the southwestern United States. The students maintained a journal in which they reflected on and responded to questions concerning course content and the teaching profession. The questions were conceived to prompt the preservice teachers to reflect upon their readings, personal experiences, small discussion groups, and any field experience completed. A small portion of the students' course grade was based on completion of the journal.

As noted, the purpose of this study was to examine preservice teachers' perceptions regarding moral development of students. Cognitive processes, by nature, are difficult to recognize and measure. One means for capturing these elusive but worthwhile phenomena involves the use of journal writing. Researchers (e.g., Farris & Fuhler, 1996; Gipe & Richards, 1992; Roe & Stalman, 1994; Surbeck, 1994) have used journals to assess the thought patterns of preservice teachers with promising results. Following this approach, the journal responses of preservice teachers were used to address the present research questions, which stem directly from two of the questions asked

of the preservice teachers. These two questions were responded to in the same journal entry to maintain consistency of thought.

1. To what extent are schools "moral" environments?
2. To what extent, if any, is it the teacher's responsibility to foster moral development in his or her students?

Near the end of the term, an outside party solicited the students' participation in the study. Of the students present, 140 volunteered participation. Names and other identifying remarks were removed from the journals of consenting students and each one was assigned an identification number. Thirty journals were then randomly selected for analysis from the remaining pool of 140 participants. The selected preservice teachers reflected the demographics of the class as a whole and were largely female (86.7%), Caucasian (86.7%; African-American, 3.3%; Hispanic, 3.3%; Asian, 3.3%; other, 3.3%), and were in their last year of teacher education (senior, 83.3%; junior, 13.3%; other 3.3%). They had a mean age of 22.03 (SD = 3.69) and most were pursuing secondary education certification (73.3%; elementary, 23.3%; other 3.3%). As reported elsewhere, the journal responses, on the whole, indicated expected levels of reflectivity depth, with the above questions eliciting the highest levels of reflectivity due to the nature of the questions (Groce, Henson, & Woods, 1999).

Data Analysis

Journal responses were analyzed with a constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1985; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in which data categories were allowed to emerge from the data. The goal of the qualitative analysis was to ensure a thorough understanding of the case being studied and to "preserve the multiple realities" of the subjects (Stake, 1995, p. 12), at least to the extent possible via journal responses.

All journal responses were read in totality prior to any formal analysis. During a second pass, each journal was read in totality again, and then read for concepts. While reading the journal entry, each thought or concept expressed was recorded on an index card and placed to the side. Each index card was also linked to the specific journal along with the demographic information of the student. The next concept, if different from the prior concepts was placed into its own category. Concepts that appeared similar or thematic were placed into the same category. Upon reviewing all journal entries, this process resulted in 24 individual categories (i.e., piles of index cards). However, many of these categories contained only one or a few cards. These categories were merged with others if reasonable but most were omitted from analysis. This left nine remaining categories, which were again read and considered for unification of themes. Due to substantive overlap, it was

determined to merge these categories into three dominant themes that captured the bulk of the preservice teachers' prose.

Results

The preservice teachers discussed the morality of schools and responsibility of teachers in terms of the roles of various persons in the arena. These included: a) the school or community's role, b) the teacher's role, and b) the parent's role.

The Role of the School and Community

The first research question asked whether the students' held that schools were "moral" environments. The term moral was purposefully not defined for the students, nor was the term explicitly defined during class discussion. The students were allowed to define "moral" based on what it meant to them and then respond accordingly. The students' responses centered on the perceived role or function of school in the lives of children. The clear majority of the preservice teachers did indeed believe that schools are moral environments, essentially due to the inherent morality of the teaching process. The perspective is supported by the literature noted above.

As one prospective teacher noted:

> The education system must provide children with our society's morals, which will help them become successful and good citizens. There is nothing about teaching that

> does not have something to do with morality, I think. Think about the ways that teachers set up rules and consequences, even what teachers decide to teach has to get filtered through some moral screen."

Another concurred that,

> . . . schools establish right and wrong in everything that happens, standing in line at the cafeteria, doing your homework, deciding to work together with other kids on a project, all kinds of things. I also think the way teachers teach in the classroom reflect what they believe. Some teachers will emphasize some subjects over others.

These comments are suggestive of many others that capture the teachers' views of professional morality, in which teaching is considered inherently moral as regards the hidden and overt curriculum. Importantly, of those holding this perspective, 65% were elementary education majors, a disproportionate representation compared to the total sample (23% elementary).

Another group of future teachers appeared to interpret "moral environment" differently. These students presumed that schools were intended to be driven by a moral agenda. This perspective assumed schools were to be places where morality is explicitly exhibited in the behavior of teachers and students, such that, as one student noted, ". . .teachers try to make schools moral places, but the students often fail to respond for

various reasons." While this view held that schools are inherently moral places, the emphasis clearly was on the failure of schools to live up to their moral imperative. As one secondary education student indicated:

> Schools try to be moral environments but too many factors are crippling their effect. With all of the recent school shootings occurring on school campuses, it seems as if some schools do not provide a "moral" environment for their students. We have to do better.

Those expressing this expectation for schools were almost entirely secondary education majors (87%, as opposed to 73% in the entire sample).

A third, albeit smaller, perspective emphasized the impact of the social and community context beyond the school, suggesting that ". . . students learn morals outside of the curriculum in school." One student indicated that "Students develop their own moral beliefs through their environment and experiences. The way kids socialize and hang-out and talk to each other impact them. The community can also have norms for how people are supposed to act." These prospective teachers suggested that communities collectively have responsibility for children's moral development.

The Role of the Teacher

The majority of respondents indicated clearly their belief that teachers were "moral leaders," "moralizing agents," and people "who should take some responsibility for their students' developing belief systems." However, the perceived role of the teacher varied based on the manner in which the teacher finds himself or herself as a moral facilitator. The prospective teachers felt that they must assume responsibility but were roughly evenly divided into four groups as to why and how. Some indicated simply that a teacher must take direct initiative to impact students. For example, "Teachers have a strong responsibility on fostering moral growth in their students and should not hesitate to do so." Another teacher stated, "I feel that almost every opportunity should be taken by the teacher to develop moral reasoning." Yet another suggested:

> Just as it is a teacher's duty to report abusive situations of her students, it is her duty to attempt to have a classroom which pushes or encourages moral development. This doesn't mean making kids be moral because that won't work. I think it does mean that teachers have to take every chance they can to set up her class so that morality is just part of the way thinks work and how people get along.

A second group of respondents couched the teacher's role in children's moral development as necessary by default, because

parents have either somehow failed or are simply absent in their responsibilities. As one elementary education major noted, ". . . teachers have the obligation to help children develop morals because parents are not teaching it at home." Another student was also direct with her views in this regard, "Because I can't always rely on parent to be good parents, then I must find it upon myself to make up for what children should get at home." Numerous others alluded that "morals are not learned at home," "parents are not teaching their kids moral development," "many parents to not take responsibility," and "not all parents instill morality in their children." Accordingly, these prospective teachers largely felt that, because parents may not do so, teachers had to ". . . whole-heartedly accept that responsibility."

A third group indicated that teachers are responsible, but should approach their role subtly. Teachers should focus on modeling morality rather than explicitly addressing it as suggested by the first group above. For example,

> A teacher is a role model. She should behave morally in front of and around all of her students, including when she gets mad at students. If she can back off and handle the situation like an adult, then the students see that. I think all teachers should be responsible for their behavior.

Another prospective teacher explained:

> We can't be direct in teaching morals, manners, and beliefs because of possible infringement on their (students') constitutional rights. However, we should not hesitate to express our own values and live out those values in front of others. I think this has a powerful influence on others.

Finally, several respondents explained the teacher's responsibility in terms of the sheer time spent with students. For these preservice teachers, proximity was reasonable justification for impacting students' value systems. One respondent argued that "The teacher is the individual that is with the child the longest amount of time during the day, and should give moral guidance." Another concurred, ". . . students will spend most of their youth in schools and therefore their initial moral growth will start there."

The Role of the Parent

Not all of the prospective teachers believed that schools and teachers should assume a role in the moral development of children. While many respondents indicated that the home environment should be ultimately responsible for children's development, a handful of respondents were more adamant in explicating the role of the parent. The intensity of their positions varied, with some simply emphasizing that moral development is not the responsibility of teachers. For example,

one student emphasized, "Teachers are not the primary caretakers of children and should not be responsible for their moral development." However, some were more explicit in their belief that morality is solely the domain of family: ". . . morals should be addressed by parents or whoever the child has at home. Teachers cannot and should not assume the responsibility that is the parents job." These respondents were clear in that the full responsibility for the moral development of children was to be found in the home, and was beyond the educational domain.

Discussion

The preservice teachers in the present study were overwhelming supportive of the idea that schools and/or communities were moral environments. However, as expected, the respondents were varied in how they defined "moral environment." One group was more reflective in their responses, suggesting that teaching, by its very nature, is a moral enterprise (cf. Bergem, 1993a; Goodlad, 1990a, 1994; Hamberger & Moore, 1997; Lampe, 1994; Ryan, 1988; Wicks, 1982; Yost, 1997).

Interestingly, most of these students were elementary education majors. Conversely, most of the secondary education majors held the perspective that schools had failed in the goal to be moral. This group difference may be due to the stronger child-centered approach in the elementary education curriculum. This approach emphasizes constructivist pedagogy and the role of

social context. Secondary education students may tend to be more subject and goal driven. While constructivist methods cut across many teacher education programs, secondary education tends to have a stronger focus on content knowledge and outcomes. Their outcome perspective of morality is consistent with this training. Of course, it is impossible to determining whether this perspective is a function of the students' educational program or a selection bias based on the type of students who tended to pursue secondary education certification.

As regards the preservice teachers' perceived responsibility for student's moral development, most respondents indeed indicated some level of responsibility for the teachers' role. Again, however, the journals indicated varied perspectives, ranging from direct intervention, default responsibility, subtle role-modeling, and responsibility by proximity. Other respondents emphasized that children's parents were the sole responsibility for the instillation of moral reasoning.

What is striking in the preservice teachers' journals is not so much that they assume some level of responsibility. Instead, the most telling point is the fact that none of the prospective teachers in any way suggested some form of joint responsibility between teacher and parent for a child's educative and moral experiences. The responses were clearly

polarized. Some assumed the teacher is responsible; others assumed the parent is responsible. There appears to be a lack of integration in the responses concerning the impact of the broader social context on students' emerging morality. At the same time, some respondents claimed that morality is impacted by multiple sources and even subtly by the teachers. Unfortunately, none of the respondents appeared proactive in their understanding and use of these constructivist concepts. Instead, they defined the forces that impacted students' developing morality as largely one-dimensional, either teacher-based or parent-based.

Of course, a likely more effective and realistic perspective would include some form of parent-teacher unification on educative goals for the student. If this is true for curriculum based issues, it is likely true for morally based issues. In light of this disjunction, teacher education programs should consider explicit attempts to help preservice teachers take a more proactive stance in forming plans to impact children's development, moral and otherwise. This could be accomplished in development or methods courses where teachers should be encouraged to frame practically all educational problems holistically.

The present research points to several agendas that could be pursued in future inquiries. First, more comprehensive

qualitative data would both help explain why the respondents perceive their roles as they do and what parts, if any, of their teacher education programs have helped form their beliefs. This data could come in the form of interviews, observations, or even via mixed methodology. Furthermore, it continues to be important to connect perceived responsibility to preservice teachers' level of moral professionalism (see e.g., Bergem, 1993a; Yost, 1997). As noted previously, perceived responsibility is likely a prerequisite for moral action. However, as Rest (1984) has noted, moral reasoning is not necessarily a sufficient condition for moral action. Therefore, research should examine the degree that preservice teachers convert perceived responsibility into behavior in the classroom.

In sum, results from the present investigation suggest that the preservice teachers both hold that schools are moral environments and assume some personal responsibility for the moral development for their students. However, the roles of teachers and parents are fundamentally disjointed, representing a lack of integration regarding holistic planning for educative problems. Teacher education programs are encouraged to facilitate such planning in the moral domain and otherwise.

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